

# The Tongue is a Fire

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[ 0 : 00 ] I preached at the early, early, early service we have here at St. John's. And one of the congregants in that service is a gentleman called J.I. Packer, Dr. Packer, who is, if you don't know him, he's one of the world's foremost theologians, and he's 87 now.

And I went up to him afterwards and I said, Dr. Packer, what do you think? Do you have any feedback from my sermon? And he said, well, Aaron, it could have been a bit punchier.

Yeah. So, punchier it is. Clearly, James here is talking about the tongue.

And we all have trouble controlling our tongues. This is a huge issue for James. A huge issue. And these sort of, I guess what are we looking at, 12 verses here, are just the beginning of a very extended section on the tongue.

You remember, at the beginning of the letter, he sets this all up in verse 26. James gives us three tests of real faith. Because he hates superficial faith, wishy-washy superficial faith.

[ 1 : 19 ] And so he gives us sort of three tests. And he says, well, they're not an exhaustive list, but he gives us three tests. He says, if your faith is real, here's how it's going to come out. You know, do you tame your tongue?

How do you use your words? Number one. Second, do you care for the vulnerable? And three, are you stained by the world? And then later on in the book, he gives a huge focus on each of these ones.

And tonight's the tongue. Not next week. The week after, more of the tongue. Obviously very important. And it's very important, especially for us in our Christian community, because I don't think there's not much that corrodes Christian life and Christian community more than the tongue.

Verse 1 kicks off sort of unusually when he introduces this subject. He says, not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

What's going on there? This doesn't mean that the whole passage is about teachers. I think he's grabbing the attention of his readers. And perhaps there were some keeners in his community that really wanted to become ministers, like really wanted to become kind of like, you know, preachers and teachers.

[ 2 : 40 ] And perhaps they saw there was some like prestige attached to this kind of position, which there is not. And maybe these guys were sort of thinking like, yeah, I'll become a teacher, I'll get the prestige.

And James is going, I just don't know if you've got it all together. They're like, here's the thing, when you teach, he's saying, when you teach, you make yourself more vulnerable to sin. Why is that? It's because speech is, that's my job. That's the job of a teacher. It's talking. You're leaving yourself really open there to say it very simply. More words, more problems, more opportunity for your heart to be revealed.

I look back over my sermons with great shame sometimes. Really, sort of the early days were, goodness, they were rough. And I've been preaching for quite a long time now.

And I remember like about, I don't know, eight or nine years ago. And I think about some of the things I said, and I was really just showing off. I was just trying to impress people, shock people.

[ 3 : 42 ] And I'd say things which weren't helpful to the sermon. And it was just a lot of arrogance. I remember using the word retarded in a sermon many years ago.

And I knew it was an edgy word. And I thought, oh, that'd be cool. I'll say that. I was talking about a concept, an idea. I was sort of saying, oh, this idea is really retarded. You know, and I thought, oh, people will nervously laugh.

And I was thinking, I can say that because I'm kind of young and cool. And, you know. I have a daughter with a disability. And I wince when I hear that word now, knowing that that word is going to be hurled at her one day as abuse.

And I think about that sermon. It was preached to a large sort of Christian conference. And I was thinking, wow, how many people did I hurt that day? So don't too many of you desire to be teachers, James says. Because your hearts will be revealed.

And so you've increased your opportunity to use words poorly in ways that hurt, bring down, dominate, anger. And this is what James means when he says, you've got to be judged with greater strictness.

[ 4 : 50 ] Because you have so much more opportunity to sin. And in verse 2, James anticipating this. Anticipating the kind of like, oh, come on, man. It's not really a problem.

Like, I've kind of got that title together, really. James says, folks, we all stumble. He just says it. Just write it in verse 2. We all stumble with this stuff here, okay?

That's not really the way we think, though, is it? I mean, we think that tongue is just one area of our life that, and perhaps not a very important area. Few of us probably think of it as the significant area of sin in our life.

We imagine that it doesn't really represent who we are. We feel as though it's not this huge problem. And we say things and we hardly think about them afterwards. We post things online and don't think about their effects they might have on other people.

I remember in gym class, in weight room, when I was 12, I've always looked very, very young for my age. I'm 44 now.

[ 5 : 51 ] And this is what I look like. You can imagine. You can imagine me at like 14, right? I was embryonic, basically.

And I remember, and I was quite skinny back then. And I remember in weight class this guy saying to me, I was trying to, you know, like lift just the bar, you know.

And he's going, come on, come on, Roberts. You don't want to be a wimp your whole life, you know. Now, I was like, this was 30 years ago. And I can remember that like it was yesterday.

His name was Fraser. I remember exactly what I, exactly what the room looked like and exactly what his face looked like when he said it. I remember when I was 13 and my mum said to me, just randomly, she said, you've got nice lips.

It's nice, eh? He goes, you've got nice lips. Girls will like kissing those lips one day. And it seems like a ridiculous thing to say, right?

[ 7 : 03 ] Just a ridiculous thing. Fraser and my mum probably forgot those words the minute they said them, you know. And they've stuck with me for years. The nice lips one stuck with me a long time. It had to.

It was some kind of hope. Yeah, so perhaps we come to this passage tonight thinking that this is not, you know, words aren't as powerful as we think they are.

And this is not really a big issue for us. Well, James doesn't let us think that. Verses sort of three to eight. Here's what he says, general terms. He says, your tongue, it is very, very powerful.

He also says, your tongue is incredibly wicked. And he says it's untameable. This is so important because, James, when we get to the end of this passage, you'll see the big picture, the big message he's trying to get across.

And I think it's this. It's that our tongue is the key to everything else in our Christian life. And it's not really about, I'm going to use these examples of, the examples of wimp and retarded and lips and stuff is kind of, sort of.

[ 8 : 19 ] He's not saying, say nice things, don't say nasty things. He's saying that, but he's saying so much more than that. He's saying, the control of your tongue leads to the control of the rest of your life.

And it's almost like it's the means of gaining control over your life. And there's a great mystery about this. Because the tongue is not just an indicator of our spiritual maturity.

It's almost like it's the way to spiritual maturity. It's a very unique gift from God, speech. And James is trying to tell us, this is the key to our spiritual lives.

Okay, first of all. First of all, I said James says, tongue is powerful, then wicked, then untamable. Let's talk about the wicked one first, okay. Three, two, five.

Just slide your eyes over that passage, those verses there. If we put bits in the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at ships also. They are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder.

[ 9 : 23 ] Wherever the will of the pilot directs, so also the tongue is a small member. Yet it boasts of great things. Very small thing. It can have a huge impact on a community, a huge impact on your life.

Its influence is completely out of proportion for the size of it. If uncontrolled, your tongue can throw your whole life out of sync.

Like a runaway horse or an out-of-control ship. There's a German ship, the Bismarck. You might have heard of the ship called the Bismarck in World War II. It was hated by the Allies because it sunk the pride of the British Navy, which was the HMS Hood.

And the Bismarck at the time was the largest battleship ever made in Europe. And it was sunk in 1940. And here's how it happened. So the British were after it for a long time. Big, hulking great thing. Couldn't bring it down.

One day, a couple of biplanes attacked it. Biplanes. The names of these biplanes, their model? The Fairy Swordfish Biplane. That's not a very impressive name.

[ 10 : 26 ] The Fairy Swordfish Biplane. Anyway, one of these, they would drop torpedoes in the water, right? One of these biplanes scored a hit. The only thing that really ever hit the Bismarck, hit the rudder.

So the Bismarck damaged the rudder. So the biggest warship ever made, all it could do was go around in circles. The British found out about this. Descended, sent all their little ships along and descended upon it and circled it and just took it down over the period of a day.

Folks, James is saying, this thing here, this is your rudder. This is damaged. If this is off, you're in danger. You're in trouble. Because there's so much power here.

Think about this, okay. God is a speaking God. The way he created the world was through his word. The way he recreates his world is by sending his word and proclaiming this word of life.

And we are created in God's image. And it's in our words and our speech. One of the significant ways we demonstrate our likeness to God.

[ 11 : 38 ] It's very powerful, this thing. Okay. Verses five to six.

Have a look at those. So we have the power of the tongue. And in five and six, the iniquitous tongue. So he's not just saying, you know, the tongue is really powerful, but sort of amorally powerful.

He's saying the problem with the tongue is this, is it can be used for such evil. This great, awesome gift that God has given us is perhaps too big for us.

Like giving a ten-year-old a Formula One car or a nuclear chemistry set. A massive power for good, which can be used for evil. So verses five and six say this.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell itself.

[ 12 : 50 ] Goodness me. It's a power of evil that can affect everything. It's a very, very vivid image that James uses, the image of fire, when describing the destructive power of the tongue.

Because you think about it back in the days, ancient Near East. What can stop fire back in those days? Nothing. It's all over. If a fire starts a big fire, it's just destruction.

And that is like words, isn't it? Once a word is out, it cannot be taken back. And even after that little spark that started a problem is gone, well, those words keep burning and spreading and destroying everything in their path.

And we have said terrible things, haven't we? Things in anger. Things out of our hurt. Things out of our brokenness. Things out of our brokenness. And we can be endlessly inventive.

And we've brought a lot of harm with our words. More harm than our fists could ever do, probably.

Folks, the tongue is a fire. A destructive fire. And in case you think James is just really talking it up here, but maybe you think like somebody called him a wimp in gym class when he was 14, and he's been looking for a chance, you know?

[ 14 : 10 ] Just to get back at this person. Folks, the Bible is in complete agreement with James here on the seriousness and the power of the tongue.

So I looked up in Proverbs every time it mentions lips or tongue or words and stuff. Let me just give you like a snippet. A snippet of in Proverbs. Just a little bit of an enormous lot that came back.

Let me just read a few to you here. When words are many, transgression is not lacking. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.

A fool's lips. This is a good one. I like this one. Fool's lips walk into a fight. His mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to the soul.

Where there are rash words, there is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts. The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor in a snare of death.

[ 15 : 12 ] Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue to himself keeps out of trouble. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

And just think about some of the big moments in the Bible. It was the first sin after Adam and Eve fell away. It was the sin of the tongue, wasn't it? Adam blaming Eve.

Eve blaming the snake. And when the prophet Isaiah was given this vision of God in the temple, what does he say? His first response, And the apostle Paul, when he's talking about the human condition, how does he describe the human condition?

What is the example he uses? Listen to this. Folks, when this is off, the life God has for us is diminished because the devil uses our tongues more than any other tool to tear down what God would build.

families, marriages, churches, communities, nations. It's like we've been given this incredible gift, this wonderful, wonderful gift, and we can use it against each other.

[ 16 : 45 ] And it's like Satan himself is using our tongue for his purposes. It's like there is a mysterious connection here.

When we're talking about the power of the tongue. It's like our tongues are somehow connected to God and heaven and Satan and hell. So we can be seeking to serve God in every other area of our life, but if the tongue is off, it's all off.

At this point, I hope you're thinking, yeah, I really need to get on top of this. I really need to sort this out. Well, folks, read what James says in verse 7. Every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and have been tamed by mankind.

That's good. But no human can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. So here's what James has said so far as a bit of a summary.

The tongue is really powerful. It's kind of freakily spiritual somehow. It can cause great evil. You've got to control it.

[ 18 : 06 ] You can't control it. It's powerful. It's evil. You've got to control it. You can't control it. I mean, it's depressing and encouraging, I think. It doesn't say there's no power that can control the tongue.

It's just that there's no human being can control the tongue. Which means that us getting on top of this in our life, in our communities, it's not about, we're not going to find that sort of in ourselves and kind of like, you know, grind it out sort of like, oh, I'm going to get on top of this and I'm going to make it work.

No, it's only tameable by the power of God himself. So what does it mean, though? What's the solution to this powerful, good, but very iniquitous tongue?

Well, that's next week's passage. No, true story. It's actually next week's passage. And Dr. Ross Hastings is preaching next week. But it does involve God renewing us, like we just said.

It involves wisdom from above. But a week is a long, long way away. So what do we do with what James has shown us this week? Well, four things.

[ 19 : 28 ] Firstly, and we're finishing here. We should examine our speech before God. And we should ask for God's wisdom in doing this.

And not just speech, but the words we write. All the words that go out of us. You know, the verse one of chapter three could also read, not many of you should become bloggers.

For you know we who blog will be judged with greater strictness. It's true. Not many of you should update your Facebook page. For you know that those who update their status will be judged with greater strictness.

Folks, examine yourselves and ask for God's wisdom in doing that. Secondly, confess your faults. Confess your angry outbursts, your lies, your exaggeration, your negativity, your constant sarcasm, your gossiping, your coarse words.

And all those words which are unformed in your mouth, that are just sort of dark mutterings in your brain. Confess them.

[ 20 : 34 ] Thirdly, perhaps some of you need to ask for forgiveness from others. For things you've said directly to them or about them. Lastly, claim Christ's forgiveness and celebrate the fact that you do have a Holy Spirit in your life who is progressively and increasingly, can progressively and increasingly help you in this area.

Ask for the Holy Spirit's work in your life. Day by day, tame your tongue. Because it is such a mighty gift with spiritual power for good, for incredible good and incredible evil.

So draw near to your heavenly Father and ask him to quench the evil that's in us and set us on fire anew.

Which is, when you think about it, one of the things that the Pentecost dealt with, right? Like, what happened on Pentecost? The Holy Spirit came and it talks about the Holy Spirit coming as fire. And it sparked power and new hearts. And it was the first sign of new creation and the Spirit coming. And how did it present itself? Speech.

[ 21 : 51 ] Wonderful speech. Beautiful, renewed speech. So pray for that in your life. Pray for that in your life. Amen.